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SUBJECT: FOLLOW-UP ON THE IRANIAN DIASPORA IN AZERBAIJAN  
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Classified By: Pol/Econ Chief Joan Polaschik for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

11. (S/NF) Summary: Although Government of Azerbaijan (GOAJ) estimates put the size of the Iranian diaspora community in Azerbaijan at 10,000, non-official estimates range from 10,000 to 25,000. The majority of Iranians living in Azerbaijan appear to do so for economic or political reasons; most have chosen not to sever their ties with Iran. Iranians in Azerbaijan maintain contact with Iran primarily through travel for family or business purposes. The majority of expatriate Iranian students in Azerbaijan report that they are interested in returning to their home country and receive no money from the Iranian government to support their studies in Azerbaijan (ref b). Iranian expatriates have access to a wide range of foreign and domestic media outlets in Azerbaijan. End Summary.

12. (S/NF) Although GOAJ estimates put the size of the Iranian diaspora population in Azerbaijan at 10,000, non-official estimates in the local media or "on the street" are usually higher, ranging anywhere from 10,000 to 25,000. Like the majority of our NGO, business, and government contacts, we feel comfortable with an estimate of 10,000 Iranians living in Azerbaijan (GRPO concurs with this view). Embassy contacts report that the majority of Iranians in Azerbaijan live in and around Baku, and in Azerbaijan's southern border regions, where extended families can span both sides of the border. According to Embassy human rights contacts, a small number of Iranians live in the Azerbaijani exclave of Nakhchivan and are involved primarily in small business and trading ventures. Not having previously monitored Iranian traffic into and out of Azerbaijan, the GOAJ has suggested that it will start tracking the travel patterns of Iranians into and out of the country (ref c).

13. (C) The majority of Iranians resident in Azerbaijan appear to be here for economic reasons. These Iranians most often view their stay in Azerbaijan as something temporary, usually reporting a desire to stay for three to five years. For this reason, these Iranians choose not to sever their ties with Iran. As economic conditions in Azerbaijan have improved over the last five to ten years (and Embassy Iranian contacts report economic conditions in Iran have deteriorated

considerably over this same period), Azerbaijan has become more attractive to Iranian businessmen and investors. Most Iranians appear to be involved primarily in small trading ventures, but anecdotal evidence suggests that Iranians have also invested in the Azerbaijani real estate market, a good investment in recent years as the Baku property market has boomed. (Note - While some Iranians report having invested in the Azerbaijani property market due to concerns over increasing tensions with the U.S., most have done so because domestic investment opportunities have become less attractive than foreign opportunities due to rising rates of inflation, decreasing interest rates on their savings and an increasingly expensive real estate market.)

¶4. (C) Most Iranians living in Azerbaijan due to political reasons appear to be Azeri nationalists for whom returning to Iran would be a dangerous proposition. According to Iranian and human rights contacts, dozens of Azeri nationalists sought refuge in Azerbaijan after the May 2006 ethnic Azeri protests in northwestern Iran. Anecdotal evidence suggests that no more than a few hundred Iranians are living in Azerbaijan for political reasons, with less than eighty having applied for refugee status in 2006, according to UNHCR contacts. The GOAJ tends to tolerate their presence and political activities as long as they maintain a low profile, usually deporting only those whose activities have drawn the attention of Iranian authorities. These Iranians rarely return to Iran, usually severing their ties either by remaining in Azerbaijan or seeking refuge elsewhere (Turkey, Europe and North America reportedly most popular). Leaders of the Azerbaijani Baha'i community (reportedly one of the oldest Baha'i communities outside of Iran and comprised of approximately 500 members) also report providing assistance to members of their faith seeking to leave Iran, usually fewer than a dozen per year. They report that Israel, Europe and North America are the destinations of choice for members

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of the Baha'i community exiting Iran.

¶5. (C) With no impediments to travel (to include visa free travel between Nakhchivan and Iran - see ref c), Iranians in Azerbaijan travel to Iran frequently for business or family purposes. Regular air, sea, and land conveyances link the two countries, and travel by privately owned vehicle or bus (multiple buses departing Baku for Tabriz and Tehran daily) reportedly most popular. Means of communications with Iran are similarly broad, facilitated by reliable landline and mobile telephone systems, and the internet. Of these means, most Iranians report a preference for using mobile telephones (for calls and text messaging), believing mobile telephones to be less susceptible to the monitoring efforts of Iranian authorities than landline calls or email. Iranians in Azerbaijan also keep up with events in Iran through the many foreign and domestic media sources available in Azerbaijan.

¶6. (C) Iranian expatriates have access to a wide range of foreign and domestic media outlets in Azerbaijan. For news about events inside of Iran, most Embassy Iranian contacts report VOA programming to be credible, with Iranians in Azerbaijan following both the Azeri and Farsi-language services. Among Azerbaijani television stations, ANS and Lider Television are the most popular (one contact suggesting ANS Television to be popular among Tehran's Azeri population). Foreign channels, primarily secular Turkish satellite stations, are also reportedly popular. Concerning separatist channels such as Oyanish Television and GunAz Television, Embassy contacts report that they do not enjoy a large following among Iranians in Azerbaijan. Iranian state television stations to include Seher Television (broadcast to Azerbaijan in Azeri) are reportedly similarly unpopular.

¶7. (C) Similar to the many Iranians who come to Azerbaijan for business purposes, the majority of expatriate Iranian students report that they are interested in returning to their home country after completing their studies. Iranian

students report that they receive no financial support from the Iranian government to support their studies in Azerbaijan, indicating that the Iranian government would prefer them to study in another neighboring country. Please see ref b for additional information on Iranian students studying in Azerbaijan.

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